

Head or Tail: A Curious Case of Cultural Hairsplitting in Bhutan

I am a student of culture and am always intrigued by the subtleties of human language and culture, mainly because they reflect the ingenuity and complexity of the human mind. Recently, I heard about a debate on the topic of how prayer flags must be fixed to the pole. Whether the head or the tail of the printed prayers should be attached to the pole is the crux of the debate. I don't watch television, so I missed the actual debate on Bhutan's national television but I later chanced upon one of the proponents who presented his case with much vehemence.

It is a curious and inconsequential issue one could take up as an intelligent excursion on a quiet weekend. So, if you have no better distraction for your Saturday afternoon, here is the debate. Those of you who need to know the general culture of prayer flags, you can find my essays [here](#) and [here](#).

Traditionally, prayers flags are printed on cloth and nailed to a vertical pole in Bhutan although those hanging on threads have also become very common today. The debate is on whether one should nail the side of the cloth where the prayer begins – and it normally does so with the syllable *Oṃ* to signify the enlightened body – or where the prayer ends, which it does with the syllable *Hūṃ* to symbolize the enlightened mind.

The *Oṃ* side should be stuck to the pole as it is the head of the prayer, argues one group. The *Hūṃ* side should flow as a tail in the wind. In fact, this is also how prayers are rolled up in a prayer wheel. The opposing group reasons that the prayers are to be borne by the wind with *Oṃ* outward. You could not have the prayers fly out on the wind backward as it were.

Because printed prayers are an extension of the book, how we print and use the book is perhaps the best analogy. In a bound book, the front side or recto of the paper has its head stuck to the binding. This is what the *Oṃ* group argues for. When one turns the page, the backside or verso has the end stuck to the binding. This is what the *Hūṃ* groups stand for. Two sides of the same coin, one could say. Yet, the issue is not that facile when pursued with religious fervour. A third group propped up to find a middle ground to reconcile the two but only to complicate things further. Prayers for the living should have the *Oṃ* side and the prayers for the deceased must have the *Hūṃ* side stuck to the pole, they suggested. This did not convince the proponent I met. “Well, if prayers for the deceased have to start with *Hūṃ*, then people even stick the *Hūṃ* side to the rope when they hang it on a rope”, he remarked. This would be unacceptable to all parties as the prayers would then be hanging upside down.

As the discussion progress, one finds there are actually five different schools of thought.

1. Stick the *Oṃ* side or head of the prayer to the pole.
2. Stick the *Hūṃ* side or tail of the prayer to the pole.
3. Stick the *Oṃ* side for the living and *Hūṃ* side for the dead.
4. Stick *Oṃ* side for some specific prayers such as *Āryadvajāgra*. For the rest, either side is fine.
5. Either side is fine for all prayers.

Thinking of the debate, I could not avoid comparing it to the one in Jonathan Swift's literary classic, *Gulliver's Travels*, if you have read this book as young children. The kingdom of Lilliput was at war with Blefuscu over the religious detail of which side, narrow or large end, of the egg one should crack first.

While I don't mean to belittle the proponents and arguments of the different groups, the fifth option appeals to my sensibility. Why the fuss as long as one can hang the prayer flags with basic propriety. Whether the Om̐ or Hūṃ would get fixed to the pole also depends on whether the pole is positioned to my left or right when I am facing the prayer. It is really a non-issue distracting us from more important issues.

What is of more importance - to drive my point home finally – then is to have the right intention and resources, and the awareness to neither harm the environment nor promote materialism and ostentation through an obscene number of flags. Unlike premodern times, most prayer flags in Bhutan today are manufactured outside Bhutan on synthetic cloth, with toxic ink and without following cultural norms. It is one item for which we could go only for a local product, particularly Darzang Prayer Flags which is printed on biodegradable cotton with non-toxic ink following cultural norms. The head and the tail of our conversations on prayer flags should be really these considerations.

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